

Working Toward Reconciliation
Narrative Lectionary: Forgiveness
March 10, 2019

People have been hurting each other since the beginning of the biblical story. When God asked Adam why he ate the fruit, and Adam said, She made me do it, there probably was a conversation at the dinner table that night. Eve might have said, I offered it to you, but *you* made the choice to taste it! When Moses came down from the mountain after receiving the Ten Commandments, and saw everybody bowing down to a golden calf, my guess is he said to Aaron, I left you in charge! This is what you do when I'm away? And then he lied, by the way. He said, Well, Moses, all this jewelry just kind of came together into this golden image.

And the church is full of stories of people hurting each other.

I'm guessing you can think of a time when somebody wronged you in the church, maybe this one or another one. In fact, maybe you're in this church because somebody wronged you in another church. Maybe a pastor has offended you. Maybe it was me!

So how do you deal with somebody who has wronged you? Here are some responses:

1. Avoid the person if at all possible
2. Talk to your friends about how you've been wronged
3. Leave the church.

All three of these are very normal responses to the pain of broken relationships. The problem is that when we use those strategies, we leave a trail of broken relationships behind, and the body of Christ remains wounded. And if we are a body in which the parts are un-reconciled to each other, we can't be the functioning, serving body of Christ God wants us to be in the world. And so in Matthew 18, Jesus gives some instructions for how to heal a relationship.

Let's read again from Matthew chapter 18, beginning with the 15th verse. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." What would it mean for someone to sin against you? Maybe somebody has gossiped about you. In confirmation class some years ago, I gave our youth a chance to tell me when someone offended them. One girl said right away, I remember when a new girl in school gossiped about me; she totally made something up. It was right there in her memory.

What if you shared with someone something private that you only told them, and then you heard it from somebody else, and you felt betrayed? We offered the Celtic retreat yesterday, and my friend Pastor Scott shared some information about St. Patrick's life. He said that when Patrick was a teenager, he shared something that he was ashamed of with a friend. Years, later, after Patrick became a bishop, he heard that this friend of his had shared that secret with all the other bishops. And he was tremendously hurt.

What if somebody called you out in a committee meeting and you felt humiliated? What do we do? Let me give you one strategy that Jesus doesn't talk about here, but that I also think is biblical, and that is to *let it go*. I don't think we always have to tell somebody when they have done something that frustrates us, or offends us. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that love is patient, love is kind and love doesn't keep a record of wrongs. So if somebody is out of sorts one day and says something that frustrates you, you might sleep on it and then say, I'm going to let it go and give that person another chance. Martin Luther in his explanation to the 8th Commandment says, Put the most charitable construction on your neighbor's behavior. You can choose to approach someone about something, or you can let it go.

But let's say it's more serious than that. Let's say it's something you really can't get over. Jesus says, If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. Notice he doesn't say, When someone sins against you, go to several of your close friends and complain about what this person did to you. No, he says, Go to the person and say, Are you aware that this offended me?

And don't take too long to make that conversation happen. I can be a great tail-dragger. Oh, I can say to myself, it'll just sort itself out. I'll get over it. I have sometimes stuffed something under the rug for a while, and then have brought it out later, and the person has said, Why didn't I hear about this before? You've been holding this against me for this long?

And notice that Jesus says, Go and tell the person in private. Why in private? Because we want to treat the other person with respect. We don't need to start by dragging other people into it. Go in private because it preserves the reputation of the person you need to talk with. And when you go, share your perspective, share your feelings, and then listen for their story. There may be a bigger picture that you don't know about.

Then he continues: But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. Take one or two other people with you. I'll go with you if you'd like to help facilitate the conversation. Or call another church member, and meet up for coffee with the person. Get another set of ears in the mix. That person you bring with you can be praying silently while the conversation is being held.

At this point, if you can't get satisfaction, maybe you let it go. The person and you see differently. And you will work on forgiving them for what they did, even though they don't see it your way. Let it go.

But if the sin is very damaging and you can't seem to move beyond it, then Jesus says there is a next step. You've gone alone. Then you've taken one or two witnesses with you. Here's the third stage: "If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." I don't think this means standing up in worship during announcements and saying, Let me tell you what so and so did to me. But it might mean calling me up, or calling up the president of the congregation, to say, May I come to the Mutual Ministry Team to share a situation with somebody that I can't resolve?

And then, Jesus says, if you run this through the church hierarchy, "and (if) the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and tax collector." To Jewish ears, that would mean not having anything to do with them. But wait a minute, didn't Jesus reach out to Gentiles and tax collectors? Matthew and Zacchaeus were both tax collectors, and he reached out to them. He didn't shun them. And his heart softens when a Gentile woman pleads with him to heal her daughter.

So when he says, If the person doesn't listen, treat him or her like a Gentile or a tax collector, for Jesus that would mean, Keep seeking them out. Don't give up on them. Push the envelope for reconciliation. Each person in the family of Christ is critically important, and we don't just write people off, even people who sin against us.

I need you to shore up my weaknesses, and what I'm strong in can help you. I believe we even need our disagreements. They help us see the world in a bigger way. There were huge disagreements in the early Christian community. Don't ever think that the early church was all sweetness and

harmony. That lasted for about two chapters after Pentecost, and then some people started selling land and not giving money to the church as they promised, and somebody quits and goes home early from a missionary trip, and people are frustrated that Gentiles are coming into the church without having to become Jews first.

There were tremendous issues to be dealt with, just as there are today. And if we just get angry with each other, and get offended when people disagree with us, and walk away, we do not learn what each of us has to bring to the conversation. Some of us are going to disagree on matters of immigration and border security, or what government should or shouldn't be involved with. But we can have those conversations respectfully and lovingly. I believe the church is one of the few places where we can come together, united in Christ, and respectfully and lovingly have difficult conversations. This is why Jesus says, Don't write each other off, even people who sin against you, because we need each other.

Now, are these conversations hard to have? Sure. And let's just go ahead and name some reasons why we might want to let things stay the way they are. One of them is that if we're honest with each other, anger can feel pretty good. We feel self-righteous, we feel like a victim; poor me. Listen to what Frederick Buechner says about anger: "Of all the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel of both the pain you're given and the pain you're giving back- in many ways it's a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you're wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

Now there is a place for anger, good, clean anger. Paul says in Ephesians 4: Be angry but do not sin; don't let the sun go down on your anger. Good clean anger says, Somebody trespassed against me, or against somebody I love, and it wasn't right. Anger can motivate us to right a wrong, or to work on an injustice. But if we continue to be angry with someone for the way they wronged us, it starts turning into feelings like resentment, and then it's not so healthy. It gets twisted. And we are the ones who are being eaten up. We are the ones held captive. One of the amazing things about forgiving somebody who has hurt you is that you release *yourself* from captivity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in his book, “The Cost of Discipleship”- “Grace is costly because it cost God the life of his Son, and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.” That person who offended you, that person who sinned against you: Christ died for that person as well as for you. You’re restoring a relationship with somebody for whom Christ died.

Maybe the key verse is verse 20, where Jesus says, For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. It took ten men to gather together in the Jewish tradition to have a synagogue, to read the Torah together. Jesus says, I am there if there are only a couple of you. I will be there in the middle of that hard conversation. And where I am, there is love and forgiveness. I will give you the grace and the strength, so that you can speak the truth in love.

At the end of Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness, Peter says, Well, Lord, since you’re telling us to reconcile with people, how many times should I forgive somebody? Peter then offers what he thinks is a generous number of times...Should I forgive somebody seven times? And Jesus says, Not seven times, but seventy-seven times. One of the ancient manuscripts even says, Seventy times seven. Sometimes we need to forgive someone again and again, not because they sinned against us again, but because we are holding it against them again, and *we* need to let it go again.

And then he tells a parable about a king who forgives a slave a crazy amount of money, 150,000 years of wages. And then the slave won’t forgive someone else who owes him about 100 days’ wages. He throws him into prison. The king calls him in and says, “I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” The king hands him over to be tortured until he pays all his debt. The scary word after that is Jesus saying: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Apparently God takes forgiveness seriously. God is ultimately working for the reconciliation of all creation, and God wants us to play our part in that. But let me say this: some of us in this room have been caused very serious suffering by someone else. I want to end with a word for when forgiveness is incredibly hard to offer. I really believe it is God’s grace that allows us to forgive great suffering. Maybe we’re not able to forgive someone yet, and we can only pray the words, Lord, have mercy on me. Have mercy on me

until I have the strength to forgive. That may be the most you can pray at this point. But it's a start. Pray for God's mercy, if you don't have the strength to forgive. And if you want help on the journey, give me a call. Amen.